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Finley, John Huston

Mobilization

[Brooklyn]

[1916]

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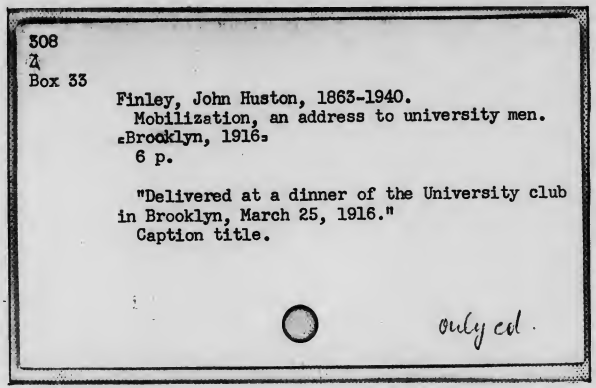

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MOBILIZATION

An address to University Men [1]

By

JOHN H. FINLEY

IN the summer of 1914 I visited Oxford University two or three weeks before the war came on, and Cambridge University three or four weeks after it had begun. At Oxford there was the calm of the cloister. There were memorials of poets, scholars, statesmen, princes and soldiers, dim with years, and there were academic conventions that paid no heed to the customs of the world outside. But at Cambridge, Cambridge which but a month or six weeks before had been as Oxford, the town was filled with men in khaki. Thirty thousand territorials were encamped there. They marched through the streets. They rowed on the River Cam. They washed the dust from their faces in its waters. One of the colleges, the one which I most wished to see, was closed in preparation for use as a hospital. Here and there I saw a don in learned costume, and at the café I heard a few students discussing matters of philosophy or science, but for the rest the glory of the school of Newton and Milton was forgotten in the rough prepar-

[1] Delivered at a dinner of the University Club in Brooklyn, March 25, 1916.

ation for the grim game of war in the " sodden fields of Flanders."

But I have one clear Cambridge memory that was not of this preparedness. In St John's College, through which I wandered alone, I found on the walls of the dining hall, where it could look out into the street, the portrait of one of her sons who has written what Augustine Birrell has called the greatest satire on modern life since " Gulliver's Travels "— a portrait which he had painted of himself before he went off to the sheep ranches of Australia. It was a portrait of Samuel Butler, whose book " Erewhon " described a land where there were Colleges of Unreason, colleges in which students were promoted for excellence in vagueness and were plucked for insufficient trust in printed matter, colleges in which the principal professorships were those of Inconsistency and Evasion, and the principal courses those in hypothetics, conducted in a hypothetical language; colleges in which intellectual overindulgence was looked upon as one of the most insidious and disgraceful forms of excess, and whose graduates almost invariably suffered from atrophy of individual opinions.

This satire but illustrates criticisms which we often hear concerning our own college life; of the lack of serious intellectual interests, of the devotion to sport, of the lack of practicality, of the protracted immaturity and the false appraisements of values, on the part of those adorable, lovable fellows whose doubles we ourselves were once.

I have wondered what the Cambridge satirist would say if he were today to scan the records of his younger fellow graduates of these " hypothetical " and " atrophying " courses of social and intellectual training.

Last June at the time of year which is for us the commencement season, there was published in the London *Times* a summary of the enlistments of the men of the several Cambridge colleges who had entered the war. Their names filled a book of seventy pages and showed a known total of 8850 men, 336 of whom had been killed, and 423 wounded,— an appalling mortality, due, it is claimed, to the exposed position which many of these men as platoon commanders assumed. Ninety were mentioned in despatches for bravery, 18 won the military cross, and 18 more won still higher distinction.

But it is not this splendid record which has alone excited my admiration; nor that of the Oxford men put beside it in as brave figures; for Oxford, one has said, " hardly dares to count her dead." It is an accompanying paragraph which tells that a complete list of the members of Cambridge University has recently been compiled, stating the service which each resident member feels he can most usefully offer and that the numerous laboratories at Cambridge have been placed at the disposal of the government, with a clear and succinct statement of the work each laboratory can do best to promote the prosperity of the armies in the field. " Cambridge has mobilized herself," says the announcement. Yes, she has transported herself into another state of spirit.

In peace the connection between learning and the need of the state becomes obscure and indirect and impersonal, but today one sees illustrated in those venerable institutions the dependence of the state on that learning, which has been the target of the practical man, but which has now come to shame the " slacker " and lead where the need is most perilous. No one doubts that if the same calls come out of the bomb-stained sky, or the mine-spread sea, or the trench-ploughed field to the colleges of America and their graduates, there will be the same mobilization of spirit. I do not have anxiety as to this. But what I am concerned for is that even without these signals we shall see this connection and shall mobilize our learning, our thinking, our courage, our industry, our skill, our art, our science, in the service of the same state which is as needful of defense in peace as ever it is in war. I wrote to the philosopher, William James, a little time before his death when that dearly lost philosopher had made me see more clearly this connection and this duty, that I not only wished to enlist myself but I would try to raise a regiment for my country. And I have been a recruiting sergeant ever since, trying to fill my phantom regiment for James's invisible and invincible army of those who are willing to pay a blood-tax in peace as well as in war for the privilege of belonging to a " collectivity " superior to their individual selves.

It is true that I have been trying to keep out of the schools distinctively military training, but that does

not mean that I am opposed to preparedness. On the other hand, I am wishing that the state might conscript everybody to give some service to the state, under a plan of constructive preparedness, commandeer every selfish luxury and waste and indulgence, call to the colors periodically every useful skill and science and art and industry, and compel a general mobilization for the common defense of our ideals, but not alone with the gun. And I am opposed to compelling the boys in school to take the gun end of it except as a final necessity, not because I want them to be spared any hardness or discipline, but because I do not want them to carry into a new generation the idea that this fighting with the gun is the supreme or only valor or means of patriotic service. We of our generation may have to stain our hands with the blood of our world brothers, but it were better so if we could only let our children build with unstained hands the thing we desire for our beloved country.

For see what we are doing: we talk with patriotic air, we boast of what we'll do and dare, and then — we make the boys prepare to do it. Let us who have the vote put the service upon ourselves and give our boys that basic physical training, nurture of spirit and discipline of mind which will not only enable them to endure hardness but will make them willing and eager to undergo later special training to take our places if need be.

An Oxford professor tells of his supreme humiliation in seeing one day men crowding one another to

find room in a train going to the races, while the Oxford men were almost literally crowding their way into the trenches, while Oxford halls were filled with wounded Britishers and refugee Belgians. If we could but see that this is actually going on here today, that men, and women too, are crowding one another in running after selfish pleasure and luxury while others are literally fighting for them in private shop or public office with as great sacrifice and bravery as those splendid university men have shown on the red edge of the war.

We are none of us too old to be "last ditchers" in service of the state. We shall not be, pray God, till we put on our shrouds. Let us learn our spiritual lesson as we look on at this bloody world clinic. Let us ask ourselves as a people how every intelligence can be mobilized, how in peace we can develop a clean, efficient, public service and enter upon a policy of national constructive defense.

I would make "conscript" a noble word by making it synonymous with "citizen" in a republic with a mission and an ideal worth fighting for. Till that time comes, may every American university man do what every Cambridge student has done, *conscript himself* and each one offer to his country the best that he has to give. May American universities do what Cambridge has done, not await government mobilization but mobilize themselves!

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